

17 March 54

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THE

WING WOMAN:

THE HISTORY

OF

A NEW CHARLATAN.

"There is at this moment, throughout this country, an awful system of trafficking or gambling with the issues of life and death—a perilous tampering with the elements of mortality."—*Speech on Homœopathy*, by DR. C. J. B. WILLIAMS.

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222


As Editor of the ASSOCIATION MEDICAL JOURNAL, I received, from Mr. B. W. Richardson, a letter containing the history of "a New Charlatan." This letter appeared in the Journal of April 8th, 1853, and was accompanied by a leading article from my own pen. In the following pages both are reprinted, at the request of several practitioners.

Copies will be sent to any address, postage free, at the rate of fourpence each, forwarded in postage stamps to Mr. Honeyman, 37, Great Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The proceeds of the sale will be given to the Medical Benevolent Fund of the Association.

J. R. C.

Putney, 12th April, 1853.



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THE WING WOMAN; AND THE SUCCESS OF MEDICAL IMPOSTORS.

THE veteran practitioner generally reads without surprise, and with but slight emotion, such histories as that which Mr. RICHARDSON has so well written, and which appears in this day's number. The veteran practitioner has been taught in bygone years, by many events within his own sphere of observation, that the popular estimate of medical skill is quite as often erroneous as it is correct. He has, moreover, from a consideration of these events, rightly concluded that this state of matters, however much it may be deplored, is nevertheless not a subject for wonder, from the simple fact that even educated observers, if ignorant of physiology and pathology, are incapable of testing medical knowledge. On the other hand, the accomplished and well-informed aspirant to the responsibilities and emoluments of practice, who has merely tasted the social difficulties and trials of his adopted career, is not likely to think so little or so calmly of the doctress of Wing, and of the other medical impostors of the day who sail to wealth upon the tide of fashionable folly. In fresh, young minds, of refined and honourable mould, the contemplation of such phenomena can hardly fail to excite feelings of discouragement, despondency, and dis-

gust ; feelings, too, which, if embittered by the *res angusta domi*, painfully endanger honesty, or cause the ingenuous man, for the sake of his integrity, impetuously to rush out of a profession which he proclaims to astonished relatives to be one which can only keep him from starvation, provided he use it as a garment wherewith to conceal a systematic charlatanism.

Are years of industry and self-sacrifice, are the life-hazards which have been encountered from exposure to pestilential disease and poisoned wounds—are all these to count as little or nothing in the scale of fortune, when weighed against the tinsel glitter of superficial boasting, the artful courting of fashionable leaders or hospital governors, and the practice of the wildest excesses of modern quackery ? If the acquisition of money be held as synonymous with good fortune in life, if gold be the only good which this world can offer, then, to answer truthfully the question proposed, we must admit that it is no rare occurrence for flimsy physicians, and medical swindlers of varied type, to reap golden harvests in fields wherein honest labourers of sterling skill can scarcely glean enough to keep the wolf from the door. But there is a brighter aspect of professional life, to which we are about to turn—an aspect which it is wholesome at all times to contemplate, but especially when the poor man sees the emoluments which he had fancied were the reward of a faithful and skilful discharge of duty, flowing past him, in full and rapid current, into the pockets of a Wing woman, a Holloway, or a Henderson. True it is, that we have ever present among us one or many reigning medical delusions, which command the influence and secure the spoils of various sec-

tions of the community—the dissipated sons and daughters of fashion, with minds replete with nonsense, and devoid of sense—the banker, the merchant, and the city Cræsus, with their one idea—or the clergyman or the squire of mere University breeding, whose education has been such as they might have had in the same cloisters centuries ago, and whose training, so far as the acquisition of actual knowledge is concerned, might have admirably fitted them to move in the best circles of heathen Greece and Rome, but which is not sufficient for the Christian pulpit, the British Senate, and the Scientific World of the nineteenth century.

Stop ! stop ! some one cries ; have not many excellent clergymen and many able statesmen come from the classic banks of Isis and of Cam ? In truth and soberness, we answer, No, not one ! The theology, the science, and the statesmanship of the Universities are sterile, sapless, monkish, and mouldy ; and all that can be gained within their walls is—and it is much, we own—a rigid mental discipline. But mental discipline is no more knowledge, than the well-tilled glebe is the waving wheat. In both cases, good fruit can only follow the sowing of good seed, and the diligent weeding of the field. The faithful priest has learned his divinity and his parish economics, under the stimulus of a good conscience, in his own home ; and ambition and patriotism have prompted many to educate themselves as statesmen. The prizemen of the public schools and Universities of England, it cannot be denied, take rank in the aristocracy of intellect simply as Mathematicians, Latinists, or Grecians ; and, unless they are instructed carefully, by themselves or others, after leaving their scholastic gymnasia, they grow up to be men of deplorably unsound education.

The Scottish schools and colleges have undoubtedly been far below those of England in point of scholarship, but they have infinitely surpassed those of England in the amount of available knowledge which they have imparted ; and the result has been exactly what might have been expected—that quackeries, which flourish in England, find much less favour among the clergy and home-educated gentry of Scotland. We have not been led unawares into this episode. We have been desirous not to be misunderstood in the remarks already made, or when we now aver that, so long as Latin, Greek, and Mathematics, are the chief portals to University honours and church livings, the education of our clergy and upper classes will continue to be so unsound, as to make it no matter of surprise that many of them should become the partizans of strange doctrines in theology or therapeutics. A reformed system of University education would do more to elevate medicine in general estimation, than any other event which is likely to happen in this country ; because it would enable the great body of our clergy, our gentry, our nobles, and our legislators, to appreciate in some degree at least, and through various media, the past progress and the present state of medical science.

In the mean time, it is the fate of the medical profession to be much depreciated and undervalued, and it is the lot of many able and in every way deserving men to be scarcely able to subsist in localities where the ignorant and the charlatanic grow rich ; but, as we said before, rays of purest sunshine may be thrown even upon this gloomy picture. Let it be remembered that when our ministrations are unrewarded by money, we often have the luxury of doing good. Mere wealth is incapable of yielding any sub-

stantial happiness during life, or any consolation at death. It is to his unhallowed gains that the deceiving practitioner can alone look for his pleasures ; and when the fleeting breeze of popular applause shall have died away, or when he is dead, his kinsmen and his children will blush at the mention of his name. Again, notwithstanding all that has been said, and all that is daily passing before our eyes, we do not hesitate to declare, as the result of a careful survey of the position of an extensive circle of professional acquaintances, that, generally speaking, after a season of probation, the man who has had a competent education, is possessed of a good moral character, of devotion to medical science, and who waits upon the sick with unfeigned kindness of heart, rarely fails to live comfortably, though perhaps seldom affluently, on the rewards of his labours.

Should, however, misfortune overtake the honest medical practitioner, and starvation threaten his family, he must pause before he seek to repair his fortunes by turning aside to quackery. He must, through the thick clouds of all his misery, contemplate the tremendous weight of his responsibilities, and remember that it is a fearful sin to buy bread with the price of human life.

The real position of the medical practitioner as regards his patients, has been forcibly expressed by Sydenham, in the preface to the first edition of his *Observationes Medicæ*. He says :—

“Whoever takes up Medicine should seriously consider the following points. *Firstly*, that he must one day render to the Supreme Judge an account of the lives of those sick men who have been entrusted to his care. *Secondly*, that such skill and science, as by the blessing of Almighty God,

he has attained, are to be especially directed towards the honour of his Maker, and the welfare of his fellow creatures; since it is a base thing for the great gifts of Heaven to become the servants of avarice or ambition. *Thirdly*, he must remember that it is no mean or ignoble animal that he deals with. We may ascertain the worth of the human race, since for its sake God's only-begotten Son became man, and thereby ennobled the nature that He took upon Him. *Lastly*, he must remember that he himself hath no exemption from the common lot, but that he is bound by the same laws of mortality, and liable to the same ailments and afflictions with his fellows."*

A few words upon a kindred theme struggle for utterance ere we lay down the pen.

To our prosperous colleagues who, after satisfying the necessities of themselves and their households, have yet to spare, we desire to say that the moral integrity of a sorely tried brother may often be saved from temptation, and sometimes from shipwreck, by a little seasonable aid privately administered from the Medical Benevolent Fund of our Association; which, from the advertisement in this day's number, we rejoice to see is obtaining increased support. We may be also permitted to ask whether a man is entitled to preach a stern professional integrity, and at the same time refrain from relieving, as God may give him opportunity, those who suffer through its observance?

* Sydenham Society's Edition. Dr. R. G. Latham's Translation, vol. i, p. 25. London: 1848.

A NEW CHARLATAN.

LETTER FROM B. W. RICHARDSON, ESQ., TO THE EDITOR.

SIR,—During a visit which I lately had the pleasure of paying to the Midland Counties, my ears were constantly assailed with accounts of the fame of a wonderful woman who has, in these last months, assumed to herself Esculapian duties, honours, and emoluments, in the little shire of Rutland.

That some of the statements made to me concerning this woman were absurd exaggerations, I have no doubt; but sufficient remains to be told, which is, I am sure, strictly true, to astonish your readers and to form a record well worthy of being preserved. Had I, sir, at command, the inimitable pen of our immortal countryman Charles Dickens, I could, I doubt not, out of the materials in my possession, frame a letter, the perusal of which would produce a temporary ague fit in the sides of the gravest of all your grave readers. The heroine of my story, holds in fact, just the same position in the domain of medicine, as the Brother Goose Trap Witness of Mr. Dickens holds in the domain of theology.

A few miles from the town of Stamford there is a little village called Wing. In the neighbouring villages Wing can never have been highly esteemed for its wisdom, as it has long been the custom to speak of its worthy inhabitants as “the Wing fools”. This title has its origin in a legend, which says that, in the first days of the Wing history, the primitive natives made a bold but unavailing effort to imprison a cuckoo by encircling it with a staked fence—a preposterous libel of course, and a libel which was once commented on in a manner highly gratifying to the libelled parties. It is said that an aged woman of the place, who possessed in a modest and moderate degree the sybilline virtue, the power to prophesy—a mother Shipton in miniature—on being

once touched on the sensitive point of her Wing, replied in memorable words, "that the day would come when more fools should enter Wing, than there ever had been fools in it". This prophecy, which, as a matter of course was only laughed at by profane and uninterested persons, has been a source of untold consolation to the stigmatized villagers, many of whom have believed in its fulfilment with an obstinacy of faith that would have done infinite credit to a Mussulman, and have transmitted the belief to their children, and their children's children.

There is often a truth rolled up in these old prophecies. In the present instance there was a *great* truth undoubtedly, a truth which in these last days has shown itself visibly, and the appearance of which has added another confirmation to the proverb, "Time brings all things to the light".

"The Wing Woman", for such is the popular title of the lady whose fame I relate, was born at the village of Hambleton, near Oakham. Her mother was an amateur professor of the healing art; but with supreme modesty she followed the example of Podalirius and Machaon, and treated wounds and sores only. No record exists as to the degree of success with which this excellent matron followed her self-imposed labours; but it would seem probable that pecuniarily the avocation was unprofitable, for certain it is, that her daughter was brought up in the lowest state of indigence and ignorance. To the daughter herself, these unfortunate circumstances have in the end proved no hindrances to prosperity. After living many years in great destitution, bodily and mentally, she became connected as nurse, or as some other servant, with the Stamford Infirmary, where the idea of becoming a doctress in her own right in all probability broke upon her. After leaving the Infirmary, she, in the course of time, became located at Wing; and having been warned one night in a dream that it was her mission to cure her fellow creatures of their diseases, she slighted not the inspiration, but commenced after breakfast on the following morning. The poor of the village whom the legitimate professors of medicine in those parts failed to cure, were the first on whom she tried "her prentice hand". Cures, the most marvellous, soon crowned

her first, and had she not been a married woman, I should have said her maiden efforts. In true illustration of the Shakespearian philosophy, the circle of her glory enlarged itself; and last summer a second Sir Astley Cooper might have looked with a jealous eye on the crowd of patients who from all quarters sought her advice and assistance. If, indeed, a history of charlatanry were ever to be written (and a most interesting history on that subject might be written by the way), there could not, I believe be found a single instance in which any charlatan had in the short space of eighteen months or two years obtained such a celebrity.

I heard from the mouths of numerous persons who had consulted "the Wing woman" so many accounts concerning her, that I took the trouble to obtain as much information on the subject as was possible. One gentleman, whose word, I am sure is most trustworthy, and who, in a low desponding state of health, was led, in opposition to his better judgment, to consult this medical oracle, has kindly given me an account of his visit, which I shall transcribe in his own words; merely premising, that his statements are quite in accordance with those of other persons well informed on the subject, that his visit took place in the latter part of last summer, and that he derived no benefit whatever from it.

"Having many miles to ride," says my informant, "I left my own home at four o'clock in the morning, and arrived at Wing at six. There were two hundred people there before me, on the same errand, and the place was like a fair: booths were erected in the village for the sale of provisions, and a vehicle ran from the house of the doctress to the Manton Railway Station, a mile and a half distant, to convey back passengers who might be coming as patients. There was a book-keeper at the door of the doctress' house, who was issuing tickets of admission in order to avoid confusion. On applying at the house I found that ninety-seven tickets had been issued already, and that sixty-eight were remaining from the previous day. By paying an extra fee I got the ninety-eighth ticket; but it was seven o'clock in the evening before I could gain admission. The reports I

heard in the meantime were of the most curious description. The doctors, I was told, were all fiercely enraged against 'the Wing woman, because she spoiled their trade', and one worthy Esculapian, who lives not a hundred miles from Oakham, was accused of having wickedly misdirected, and turned ten miles out of their way, a van of sufferers who had inquired of him if they were on the right road to Wing? I was also told of a man who, in conveying to his master a bottle of the doctress' health-giving potion, tasted of it by the way, and found it to give him so much of inward comfort that he partook of the whole, and suffered for several hours afterwards from palsy of the lower limbs, difficult articulation, and obscuration of the senses.

"In conversing with the numerous persons who were there to consult this famous woman, I was surprised to hear from what great distances many had come. There were people from various parts of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, and even out of Surrey. I heard, also, many particulars about the woman herself; was assured on all sides, that she could neither read nor write; that she claimed inspiration; and that she fanned the flame of inspiration by absorbing the pages of old Buchan, which were read to her regularly. I ascertained, moreover, to my great joy of course, that her fees were small, and that, like many practitioners really in the profession, she commenced by practising *gratis*. When her fame widened, however, she begun to take small fees, one, two, three, and four shillings per patient, according to circumstances. She has thus been enabled to have her house enlarged, and to take a run to the sea-side occasionally.

"My admission to the presence of the doctress took place, as I before said, at 7 P.M. In a room on the ground floor of her house her medicines were preparing. Herbs and other things were boiled in a copper, the decoction was then strained through a wicker basket, and transferred to tubs, in which it was fermented with yeast. When ready for use it was conveyed up stairs in wooden pails. The sight of this medicine making was rendered as imposing as possible. On ascending the stairs I was ushered into the presence of the doctress. She received

me with great gravity. She was stained all over with medicines, and she and all her friends were dirty beyond description. Her nails were especially filthy. I should take her to be about 36 years of age. She did not like me to describe any symptom, but tried to say what I felt without assistance from me. She struck me as being a shrewd observant woman; and one particularly cautious in what she said. She told me that I should have come to her sooner, and that the liver was diseased. She ordered me to be careful in diet, and so on. Surrounding her were twenty jars containing her various remedies, and these she dispensed by means of a ladle into large bottles. The medicines were of two kinds; the one warm and stimulating, the other containing quinine in considerable quantities. She gave me quinine. In one corner of the room I observed a very filthy old woman rolling pills, with a most disgusting pair of hands; but since my visit a London patient has presented them with a silver pill machine, so that the pills are probably less dirty now—a days, if they are not dirt altogether. I left the house greatly disgusted, and wondering how I could ever have allowed myself to be so imposed upon.”

I have thus, Mr. Editor, given you a narration of one of the most singular kinds of quackery which has ever flourished, even in this age of quackery. Some of your readers may be inclined to opine that I had done better to let the subject alone—to let it die out of itself, without record. With all deference, I think otherwise; believing that in the history of all such impositions as the one just related, a great lesson is embodied. The success of the “Wing Woman” offers another proof of the gullibility of human nature; and affords reason why other medical frauds, practised by persons much better educated, and far more guilty in point of morality than this miserable, self-deceived woman at Wing, are so successful, for brief periods of time, in the opposition they offer to the progress of true and scientific medicine. In another place, I once endeavoured to show that one great cause of the success of quackery lies in the fact that the science of medicine has advanced so far, and the information of medical men has become so great, that the ge-

neral public are lost in attempting to follow the scientific physician; but that, being at the same time anxious not to feel ignorant in a matter that so greatly concerns themselves—the cure of disease—they are ready to turn their attention to any medical system which they think they can comprehend, however absurd, or however dangerous, that system may be. I regret that further thought on these matters only confirms me in this opinion; and I imagine that no better proof of its correctness could be offered than the history of the “the Wing woman”.

Ignorance, Humbug, Impudence, potent three! what wonderful tricks can be played by your agency on simple, marvel-loving, bluff John Bull! Louis Napoleon, standing on the opposite coast, and turning a tenpenny telescope in the direction of Threadneedle Street, makes John open his eyes, gird up his loins, and declare his determination to resist the invader to the death, though he should have all the soldiers of the continent at the call of his trumpet. But there rise up incessantly, under the very nose of John, a hundred arch enemies, who, with the three weapons named above, play with him as with a shuttlecock, and obtain costs for their exertions. Now, the health of John is ever a weak point with him, and hence the quack is at all times ready to offer him battle, and at all times conquers. Unfortunate, credulous John! yesterday, to be cured of a hoarseness, he stared, for three-quarters of an hour, with the most ludicrous expression of countenance, at the slim paws of a Mesmerist; to-day, for a depression of spirits, he is induced to swallow one-millionth part of the trillionth of a grain of natron muriaticon, forgetting altogether that he took two drams of the same remedy with his last potato; tomorrow he will suffer from bile, and, Sampson like, will deliver over his locks, and the delicate balance of his life, to the modern Delilah, the “Wing Woman”.

With many apologies for this long intrusion on your space,

I am, etc.,

BENJAMIN W. RICHARDSON.